Kurdistan and Sweden, Finland's NATO Membership

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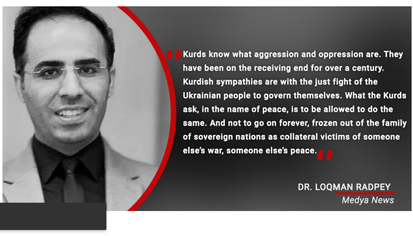

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Russia invades Ukraine, prompting Finland and Sweden to seek NATO membership, but Turkey sets the conditions, demanding actions against the Kurds: Or else Turkey will veto entry into NATO. And so the Finns and Swedes give in to blatant political blackmail.

History is rhyming, again. It seems absurd but this is just the latest twist in an old story. A century ago with the Treaty of Sèvres after World War I, the victorious Allies promised sovereign independence to Kurdistan. Turkey objected, so the treaty was scrapped, never implemented. Instead, the Kurds and their homeland, Kurdistan, were partitioned among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Minority rights and self-determination were denied to the Kurds, a people indigenous to the region but ethnically, culturally and linguistically distinct from Turks, Persians and Arabs. Kurdish identity was brutally suppressed in each country. Oppression drove some Kurdish activists into exile abroad, setting up fully legal offices in Finland and Sweden among many other countries.

Turkey has issued a list of actions for the Scandinavians to implement to Ankara's satisfaction. They demand that the Finns and Swedes cut ties with the Kurds of Rojava (Western Kurdistan in Syria) and their military and political offshoots (YPG and PYD) under the pretext of an alleged link with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. Sweden has already taken "concrete actions" in this regard, putting the Kurds at serious risk. These actions, including extraditing Kurds to Turkey, come after the tripartite memorandum of June 2022 among Sweden, Finland, and Turkey.

The reason for joining NATO is obvious: "Russia is not the neighbor we thought it was." Sweden and Finland seek to assure peace by securing their land and maritime frontiers from Russian provocations. That much is understandable. The question is why should this be achieved by the outright betrayal and sacrifice of others?

By the trilateral memorandum, Sweden and Finland are committed to refrain from providing "support to YPG/PYD", preventing "activities by individuals in affiliated and inspired groups or networks linked" to these organizations. But what Finland and Sweden do to please Turkey makes no contribution "toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations" (Article 2 of the 1949 Washington Treaty that established NATO). It is common for countries to take into account their national interests, but obtaining secure borders at the expense of other, distant nations does not bring "the preservation of peace and security" (as in the Preamble of the Washington Treaty). Instead, it promotes instability. The recent Turkish airstrikes on the Kurdish forces' positions and critical civilian infrastructure in Rojava reiterates this. The attacks have already killed many civilians. The international community has preferred to shut up.

Since 2012, the territory under the Rojava self-rule has been a refuge for several ethnic and national groups. Unlike so much of the violent wider Middle East, the management of territories under Kurdish control has brought peace and stability. The Kurds' fight against the genocidal terrorists of ISIS (Daesh) and other extremist groups has provided a protective shield for Europe and elsewhere. This feat was not achieved by compromising the security of others.

And Kurds continue to cooperate fully with the West to keep the lid on ISIS resurgence, especially in controlling the Hol camp which holds almost 60,000 residents central to ISIS' mobilization. With Western assistance, the Kurds played an indispensable and decisive partnership role in ridding the Middle East of this fanatical, destructive entity. The result has ensured relative stability over the last few years. In a globalized world, relations are inextricably intertwined. The benefits of a peaceful Middle East reverberate near and far.

The Kurdish offices in Finland and Sweden are normal political representations engaged in lawful activity. If they were involved in terrorism, the Finnish and Swedish governments would have expelled these offices long ago. Kurds also triumphantly came out of the investigation on the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme when it was proved that they had clean hands while some tried to blame the killing on them. By contrast, Erdogan's cynicism, blackmail, and human rights violations are well documented. It is this same President of Turkey who weaponizes refugees to pressure the West, his "allies" in NATO. He has ruined lives, making human pawns of unfortunate victims fleeing violence, controlling the refugee flow like a faucet turned on and off at his whim. Now Erdogan weaponizes Putin's fiasco in Ukraine to further his own jihad against the Kurds.

Kurds know what aggression and oppression are. They have been on the receiving end for over a century. Kurdish sympathies are with the just fight of the Ukrainian people to govern themselves. What the Kurds ask, in the name of peace, is to be allowed to do the same. And not to go on forever, frozen out of the family of sovereign nations as collateral victims of someone else's war, someone else's peace.

Dr Loqman Radpey is a research fellow of the Edinburgh Centre for International and Global Law (ECIGL) in Scotland. Since 2012, he has studied and written extensively on Kurdistan and statehood, self-determination and the Kurds. Loqman completed the PhD in Law at the University of Edinburgh in early 2022. His writings have appeared in leading peer-reviewed journals and international law blogs.

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